

On your mark! Set! Go! These are the words spoken at the start of a race, at least at some races. They are used for both sprints and marathons. They tell the runners to come to the start line, to get ready and to start running. While you might hear these words before a foot race, you don't hear them in most other races. But we could. Can you imagine the preacher saying this at a wedding before pronouncing a couple man and wife? Can you imagine your employer saying to the first day on a new job?

Can you imagine God saying that to us? He does! Maybe not in those exact words, but He does tell us to come to the line, get ready and to run. Hebrews 12:1 (NLT) says, **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.”** The crowd has gathered to watch the race, the people who have gone before us. They call us to the race. We are told to get rid of any excess weight, anything that would prevent us from running, cause us to stumble or fall. And then we are told to start running. Faith allows us to run with perseverance the race before us.

But we need to remember, it is not an easy race. It is an endurance race that other have run before us. Those who have successfully completed ran in faith. If we want to finish the race, we have to hold onto the faith, too. Hebrews 11 tells us that faith enabled the children of Israel to pass through the Red Sea. Would you have the courage to walk pass a wall of water that could come down on you at any time? The Israelites did because they had faith in all that God had done for them. Do you think the walls of a fortified city would fall down just by having people walk around it for a number of days in a row? That's what happened when people of faith walked around Jericho.

Faith allows us to keep running the race God sets before us. Hebrews 11 again tells us that faith shows in the lives of people who have been tortured, mocked, beaten and thrown in jail for their faith. Life can certainly pull us down. It pulls us down when we enter into the wrong race. It is far too easy to get caught up in the rat race rather than the right race. Society teaches us from early on that we have to be busy. And it starts when we are still kids. How many parents struggle to get their kids to all of the things they are involved in? It is not easy. And it doesn't get any easier in college, when we enter the workplace, and even in retirement. It is too easy to run from one thing to another without any clear purpose or direction. Do you ever get tired of all of the running that you think you have to do?

That is not the kind of life God intended for us. God wants us to go through life with Him, to live with a purpose, to have a direction. Hebrews 12:2 tells us how to keep running the race of faith, **“We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our**

faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." Jesus makes it possible for us to live the new life of faith, to go through life with Him. He came to release us from the rat race and to restore us to the divine race. He came to call us by name to be His own special people, people who live in a way that brings him honor and praise.

It is the faith that we have in Jesus that propels us upward when life pulls us down. Faith gives us access to God's strength. God's love changes us. When God's Spirit is alive in us, we become new people. Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT) tells us, **"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."** This is the help, the strength that we need to keep moving forward as God's people. When life gets tough, God's Spirit helps not only to endure, but also to mature in faith and live in a way that makes the lives of people around us so much better.

The race of faith is a team race, not an individual event. We are called to run this race together, to help and encourage one another. Today we are welcoming new members to our race team. Today we are listening as two of our young people confirm their place on this team. We need each other. We can provide the help, the support, the encouragement that we all need. When one of us wants to give, another can grab us by the hand and remind us that it is too soon to quit. Jesus didn't give up on us. We can't give up on our faith or on one another.

There is an amazing thing that happens in faith and in life. When we take the focus of ourselves and begin to help others, it brings out the best in us. When a grieving Mom who had lost her child began to see the needs of other families in similar situations, she started Ellie's place to help grieving children and their families. Another mom started MADD, mothers against drunk drivers to help save the lives of people all over our nation. You get the idea.

Faith draws us closer to God and to one another. Faith is based on God's gift of love. God's love has the power to transform our lives. God's love is not like my love for chocolate or your love for something else. God's love is unique because it lasts. 1 Corinthians 13:7 (NLT) tells us, **"Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."** It is this kind of love that draws us together in faith and in the Lord.

Make sure that you are in the right race, that you are living for the right reasons. Don't put your hope in things that don't last. Run the race, live your life in a way that brings glory and honor to the Lord. After all, He loves you. He makes it possible for you to be part of his eternal family and to live in His love. Keep running the race of faith. Colossians 2:6 (NLT) says, **"And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him."** In other words, keep running the race of faith and glorify God in your race. Amen.